maybe next time i'll take you with me
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by iphigenias

Summary

The honesty feels unfamiliar, but so did flying at first. You just have to keep getting back in the pilot's seat and Lord knows, that's one thing John's good at.

The other's following some guy from Wyoming halfway across the world.

Notes

This one fought me tooth and goddamn nail lol! I'm sorry for the wait and though I hope the next part will come sooner, I can't promise anything. One million thanks to everyone who has been reading along with this series and especially to Tegan. I scrolled back through our messages and they start apparently on 24 March which is close enough for an anniversary <3 love you so so much good morning did you know you're my favourite person ever <3

As always, this fic is based upon the apple tv portrayals of the 100th bomb group and absolutely no disrespect is intended towards the real men who served. Title from orville <3 I'm on tumblr <3

Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Buck—

I keep thinking about how we met.

Buck—

I keep thinking about how we met. Of all the flying schools in Texas—well. I guess there aren't that many. Of all the windows to jump rope outside of, then. Just your luck it was mine. I don't know if I ever apologised for the nickname—I really did think you were Buck, when I first saw you. He's a pain in the ass and we never really got on but he's got your cheekbones and it was goddamn early, Gale. I'm still amazed you never rolled your ankle in the dark like that. You were so adamant about it not being your name that I couldn't help myself, and then I guess it stuck. Stuck you with me. Truth is you're the one who should be over here already because it's always been me following you, not the other way round. Only I'm glad it turned out this way. If I could keep you from the worst of this war I would.

Buck, I don't know how to describe it.

John spends his first two weeks as Air Exec drunk.

The boys with the 389th, they've seen enough of this shitshow to not bat an eye when a major passes out at the bar. One of them even gets him a glass of water, or so John assumes, because it's waiting there by his elbow when he convinces his eyes to open again. His mouth feels syrupy, his hands sticky, though whether that's from spilled whiskey or drying blood from today's mission—John's not sure. He did try to scrub it all clean. If Buck were here he'd be sitting in the corner, twisting his toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other. Watching John make a fool of himself and shaking his head every time he looked over as if to say: *Jesus, John. What am I gonna do with you?*

Which seems to be Buck's default, of late. Not that John does anything

to help it.

Buck's not here to haul him home this time so John drinks the water. It tastes like the tap it came out of. He pushes his stool back from the bar and makes his unsteady way to bed. It's finally cool outside. John knows it's summer and all, but still he feels cheated, blames whatever schmuck it was that told him England was supposed to be cold. He can't even wear his sheepskin around the base most days. At least Buck would get a kick out of that. Christ, John'd kill for a bike. Split his head open in the ditch by the side of the road and be done with it. For a moment John can see the body, and it looks a lot like the kid shot to pieces in his fort today. Blood pooling from a nasty head wound, turning the sloshing mud red. It would be colder, and slower, and lonelier, than dying in that meat grinder of a sky. Say what you will about the Nazis. But they'll kill a guy quick.

A Jeep sounds its horn right behind him, swerving around John where he's stood on the wrong side of the road. "*Fucking watch it!*" someone shouts, throwing two fingers over their shoulder as the lights fade into the distance.

He blinks, and the body disappears. John's alone.

You've ridden horses? I know Wyoming's the cowboy state but I don't want to assume. You never did talk much about home unless it was about Marge, and I don't think you'll be surprised when I tell you I tried to tune it out when you did. My uncle had this property near Sheboygan. That's a little ways down Lake Michigan from home. When Mom had enough of three kids running around and tearing her place up she'd send us down there for the week. Uncle Kel had this one horse, Dusty. She was a fat old mare with a nasty temper and she almost kicked me in the head one time when I got stupid and too close. The look in her eyes, Buck. I know you know what I'm talking about. Kel had to calm her down after and I don't think I've ever seen anything that wild. At least I hadn't, 'til we got in the air here. All that same fear and anger, only it's everywhere, and happening so quick you can barely dodge the kick when it comes. Though I still think old Dusty could give Adolf a run for his money.

Curt's due in the day before Buck and John commandeers a Jeep to meet him. There's a case to be made for favouritism, to be sure, but

John'll gladly take the write-up—it's been a long and lonely two weeks in England and he's so fucking tired of bureaucracy. Why the hell they made him Air Exec when he's been allergic to paperwork his entire goddamn life, John has no clue.

It's been longer, since he's seen Curt. He was home on one last bit of leave when John shipped out, and they'd said goodbye three days earlier, in the shadowy corner between the mess and the shower block that had made Curt laugh, kiss John silly, and say something about romance being dead. "Guy's gonna get ideas," Curt had grinned after, John still on his knees with his forehead pressed into the meat of Curt's thigh. They were both catching their breath and every inhale sent small shock-waves down John's spine. "Send-off like this. Might think he was special, or something."

"You already think you're special."

"Yeah, but I like to hear you say it." He'd helped John to his feet and buttoned him up, hands brushing against John's hips after and lingering there. His expression was hard to make out in the dark. "I'm kidding, Bucky," he'd said softly after a moment. "I know I'm not the one you want."

"Curt." John's throat worked around the words he couldn't force out. "I'll see you over there. Alright?"

"Not if I see you first."

John parks the Jeep by the side of the airstrip and waits. It's late afternoon by the time the boys land, the sun turning orange where it sits low in the sky. It limns Curt in light as he climbs down at last, the rest of *Wild Cargo* long gone on the truck back to base. His eyes catch on John straightaway and he grins.

"Saw you waitin'," he calls. "Sorry. Had to check my gear."

"Yeah, yeah." They clasp hands when Curt's close enough; he smells like engine oil and sweat, and his skin is warm against John's. With his other hand, Curt reaches over and plucks John's shirtsleeve at the elbow.

"What, no sheepskin?"

"Don't tell me you're disappointed."

Curt gets this look on his face, then, the one he makes when he wants

John to kiss him. He'd made it that first night in Boise, before John even knew what it was. "That's one word for it," he says, arching his eyebrows.

"Get in the goddamn Jeep, Lieutenant."

"Yes, *sir*."

Curt tips his head back while John drives, closing his eyes against the last rays of the sun. His arm rests comfortably on the side of the Jeep, tapping out a beat John doesn't recognise. There's an ache in his throat when he looks away to focus on the road. "How's Buck?"

The tapping stops. When he glances over, Curt's opened his eyes. "Same as everyone," he says with a shrug. "Itchin' to get over here. Marge had to go home last week, so he's been antsy. Not that you can tell by lookin' at him. You know."

"Yeah." He feels more than sees Curt give him a knowing look. "And your folks? How's your mom?"

"Oh, torn up about me leaving her. But I told her, ain't nothing gonna happen. Not while Dickie's got my back… don't hurt to have an Air Exec in my pocket, either."

John forces out a laugh. "Don't know what good I'll be up there." He flexes his hands where they're gripping the steering wheel. Flak, coming in all directions. Warm blood splattered across John's face. Heart pounding loud enough in his ears to almost drown out the sound of a man dying over the radio; a kid, really, whose name John didn't even know. He'd asked what the hell he was meant to tell his guys and even now, days later, when John's turned every bit of it over in his mind, pulled it apart like taffy, there's no words for it. He can't send Curt into that shit without knowing—but he doesn't know how not to, either.

Maybe Curt senses his mood—or maybe he's been just as lonely as John. He stays quiet the rest of the drive, right up until John's parked the Jeep when he clears his throat and says, "so who's the gentleman and who's the lady?" He bats his lashes, barely visible in the growing dark. John's glad for the laugh it startles from him; Curt's always been good like that.

"Open your own goddamn door," he replies, and Curt grins, throwing his hands up in surrender.

The barracks are empty when John leads him inside and with the lights out, the sun almost set, there's no looking in through the windows to see. Curt presses John up against the door, closing it. They breathe into the space between their bodies and the last time they did this sits heavy in John's throat.

"It's alright," Curt says, then again: "I'm alright."

His fingers curl around John's tie, pulling him down 'til they're kissing. He tastes like gum—Buck's brand, the kind he says helps with airsickness though John's never seen Buck queasy a day in his life. Curt must've borrowed it from him, before shipping out. He skims his hands down over John's hips, firm enough to feel the warmth of them over his uniform.

"Won't they be looking for you?" John murmurs, Curt's mouth having moved from his lips to the hinge of his jaw. He tilts his head back for a better angle and hits the door with a dull thud.

"You're an awful driver. Three wrong turns." His mouth finds John's throat and stays there. "Took us an extra thirty minutes just to get back to base."

"Tell me you're kidding." Curt smiles against his skin.

"They'll believe it."

"Jesus. Don't know whether I should be impressed or—" *offended*, was the word John was aiming for. Curt's hand around him, clever and sure, erases it from his mind entirely.

Curt's smiling again. It dimples his cheeks like crazy, crinkles laugh lines under his eyes. He looks up at John through his lashes and says, "definitely impressed," before kissing him again. His hand feels everywhere over John, despite all the clothes they're both still wearing, and John's kissed and been kissed in the two weeks since he came over to England but it wasn't like this. Curt's mouth is insistent and rough against John's, still tasting like gum, and the thought comes to John, unbidden:

If I ever kissed Buck it would taste like this.

He comes with a suddenness that startles them both, gasping quietly and sweating in the close quarters. Curt kisses his neck with his hand still on him, teasing John through the aftershocks, until it's this side of too sensitive and Curt lets go.

“Fuck,” Curt breathes out. John nods, blinking back to himself. Guilt crawls its uncomfortable fingers up his throat and John dips his hand to Curt’s fly.

“Let me?”

Curt pretends to check his watch and John laughs, shoving him away. The moment resets itself. He looks at Curt and makes himself see him. It’s neither of their faults he’s not Buck. John takes hold of his elbows, spinning them slowly around so it’s Curt’s back against the door. “Make it four wrong turns,” he says, and sinks to his knees with Curt’s eyes on him, the wrong shade of liquid blue in the dark.

> *It doesn’t help that I’m alone here. Maybe it would’ve been better if I’d stayed behind the desk pushing paper but you know me, Buck. I’d claw my own eyes out before the week was done. Or I’d think about it, at least. It’s not like the guys aren’t welcoming here—they are. But it feels different to be sitting in a fort next to a guy you just met, a guy who’s name you barely even know. It’s nothing like being up there with you. You, Curt, Blakely and the rest. Never thought the best friends of my life would be made in Texas and Idaho, of all places, but there you have it. I guess you know that already. Always been two steps ahead of me. When it counts.*

It’s easy to lie to Buck about it. John’s been doing it since he fell in love with him, since even before he knew what it was that gripped at his chest whenever Buck looked his way in Texas. John’s learned to live with half-truths and evasions, quashing down any small bit of hope when Buck’s hand lingers on him too long; when he says his name low, all drawn-out, Wyoming-drawl, and Marge is three states and a whole world away. He thinks, in turn, Buck’s learned to look the other way. So when he asks what it’s like his first night in England, and John just shrugs, taking a pull of his beer to hide the way his mouth’s turned down without his say-so, Buck doesn’t press. His eyebrows draw together, a little bit, and he tilts his head like John *has* said something, and he’s said it wrong—but the next thing out of his mouth is a question for Curt, which curls his lips into a smile and just like that, it’s forgotten. Another truth to lock away with the rest. John watches them, and by the time he sets his beer back on the table, he’s managed to make himself smile too.

What that really means is, two days later, John sends his best friend up in the sky and doesn't tell him he'll be a different person when he comes back down again. If he comes back down. There're more chances to change that than John can count—over breakfast in the mess; after the briefing; catching Buck's sleeve before he can climb into the truck and laying it out, bare, desperate in any attempt to make him understand.

John does none of that. He eats his eggs. He trails the others from the briefing as they go over Curt's notes. He gives Buck his lucky deuce and blows Curt a kiss and tries to chase away the feeling that he's shaking out of his own goddamned skin. "That's where I'm goin'," Curt tells him, pointing up, and John thinks, with a suddenness that almost bowls him over: let me keep them. Please, let me keep them both.

It's an ugly, awful feeling in his chest when, on the heels of that thought, comes another: that even if just one fort came back—if it was Buck's, John could live with it.

It makes him a piece of shit, but John's never claimed otherwise.

After that, all there's left to do is wait. John drinks three cups of coffee and starts on a fourth before Bowman confiscates the pot. It's a good call; his hands are shaking. John sticks them in his jacket—cold enough, finally, to justify the sheepskin—and presses his hips into the metal railing, eyes trained on the empty sky. Remembering. Trying not to remember. Praying, if you can call it that. If a Catholic who hasn't been to confession in thirteen years is allowed to ask God for anything.

The wind defeats him in the end, and John winds up back inside. He has paperwork he should be doing, but the numbers blur in his head. A buzzing that sounds an awful lot like the engine of a B-17 takes up residence in John's ears, and it's a full minute before he realises he's hearing it for real—a fort, limping through the sky back to Thorpe Abbotts. The smoke it's trailing makes it hard to make out at first, but John grabs the binoculars and trains them on it until he can be sure: it's not Buck. Relief and fear curdle together in his gut.

"You wanna head down there?" Bowman's voice at his elbow startles him. John swallows round the lump in his throat and shakes his head.

"I should wait for the rest."

"Alright." Bowman's hands come around his, nudging the binoculars

from his grip. “Go back inside, Major. They’ll sound the alarm.” It’s not an order, but John follows it anyway. The pitying look Bowman’s giving him is more than John can stand.

It doesn’t even take an hour.

Fifteen forts. John counts, then counts again. He keeps the binoculars pressed to his face until he can make out the names, and his knees almost buckle when he recognises Curt and Buck. Bowman doesn’t need to ask him if he wants to head down there; John’s already making for the Jeep. He drives them, heart thrumming a staccato beat in his throat, wishing he’d had more to eat today than shitty powdered eggs and coffee—though if he had, it’d probably all just come up again. The haunted looks on the faces of Veal’s remaining squad is familiar enough by now, though seeing it reflected back at him in something other than a mirror flips John’s stomach; carves a hollow into his heart.

Buck’s got that same look, when John catches up to him.

He’s alone under the wing of his fort. It’s got flak blasted through the body and an acrid, burning smell coming off it, but the ground crew are clustered round the other side so it can’t be about to explode. What is there, that John can say? I’m glad you’re not dead; I prayed for it?

He’d laugh, if he didn’t feel so sick about it all.

It seems cruel to talk about this under a sunny summer sky. Technically they shouldn’t be talking at all, but when Buck asks, halfway back to base, “why didn’t you tell me?” Well. Buck’s the one, who’s learned not to press.

John can’t help but put pressure on the wound. “What?”

“You’ve been up,” Buck says. “Two missions. You didn’t tell me it was like that.”

A truth, then, for a truth. “I didn’t know what to say. You’ve seen it now.”

“I don’t know what I saw.” He shakes his head. “Thirty guys. Just…”

“I should’ve been up there with you.” The words are out before he can stop them. He forces himself to look away from Buck, fixing his eyes on the road. How is it, just days ago, they were driving this same

route, two bikes rattling around in the back and John feeling lighter than he had in weeks? What happened to those couple of kids, jumping rope in the pre-Texas dawn? What the hell did they ever think they knew of war?

Two missions, Buck asked John. Truth is, he'd fly two hundred just so Buck wouldn't have to again. If he can't do that—besides the fact Buck would kill him for even trying—least he can do is fly them by his side.

"We've got a long road ahead of us," Buck murmurs, gazing toward the horizon. John's hands flex over the wheel. There's nothing, really, he can say to that.

There's a letter waiting for John, once interrogation's over, and he and Curt have organised to meet again at 1900. He'd written Lou and his mom when he'd first crossed the Atlantic, the same mindless platitudes about jolly old England; how he's been keeping safe and out of trouble. The reply is postmarked Boise; John's not surprised Lou saw right through him. *Next time you want to bullshit someone, John Egan, pick another girl.*

She's written more than he expected her to, the letter filling the front and back of three sheets of paper. He's still reading it when Buck comes inside, slowing his stride as he passes John's occupied bunk but otherwise continuing onto his own, sitting heavily down and peeling off his boots with a sigh.

"Thought you were headed out with Curt," he says, not a question, when John lifts his eyes from the postscript to find Buck already looking his way.

"Later. Think we all need a nap, first."

"You're telling me Air Exec don't have papers to file, or something?"

John throws his pillow at him. Buck bats it easily away. He nods at the letter. "Your ma?"

"Nah." John fiddles with it. "Lou. She says hi."

Buck blinks. "…does she."

"Well, she says…" John looks for it. "*Blanche told me to tell you your friend's the worst date with the sweetest face she's ever had. I told her clearly she'd never stepped out with you, otherwise one of those points would be up for debate. And it's not you with the sweet face, Johnnie,*

sorry to disappoint."

"Ah." Buck rubs at his chin. "And Blanche is, uh…"

"The girl you were s'posed to keep smiling all night when we went out with Curt and Lou's friends? Yeah, Buck. Same night you sat in the corner feeling sorry for yourself."

"I wasn't feeling *sorry for myself*—"

"No, no, I get it." John raises his hands in surrender. "She was no Marge. Who is?" He lets his eyes slide away before they can get caught on the strange expression on Buck's face. "Anyway. She wrote a lot worse things about Curt, actually, so count yourself lucky that's all there is." When he chances a glance back, Buck looks again like he always does: gaze measured, mouth steady. Whatever it was that had been on his face is gone. "Funny. Thinking of that now. Seems like a lifetime ago."

"You say that like you're a different person."

"Aren't you?" This time it's Buck who looks away. John lets the question hang in the air a moment before standing. "I should get going. *Some*one reminded me of all the paperwork I have to do." Lou's letter is still in his hand, so John stuffs it back in its envelope and chucks it on the bed.

"Here." Buck hands him his pillow. "John, I—" He breaks off, chewing at his lip. John needs to invest in some toothpicks of his own, so he can give Buck one when he needs it. "I'm sorry you weren't up there today. But I'm—glad, you're okay." He shrugs out of his jacket and lays back on his bunk, gaze fixed on the low ceiling. "You got people who care about you, Bucky. That's all you should know."

That same expression on his face is back, but John still can't place it. It frightens him, that there's still parts of Gale Cleven he doesn't know. Three years and change living out of each other's pockets, and sometimes John doesn't recognise him at all.

Buck rolls over, away from John, who feels frozen in the space between their two bunks. What he didn't tell Buck was the rest of Lou's letter: *And it's not you with the sweet face, Johnnie, sorry to disappoint. I know you agree with me. Maybe you should do something about it. Wyoming's a long way from England.*

John takes an aborted step forward. From where he's standing, he can

see over Buck's shoulder—can see the photograph of Marge he's clutching in his hands. To have it out that quickly, it must've been under his pillow—or, worse, in the pocket of his uniform, buttoned up close against his heart. Something cold washes through John's body, like ice syringed straight in his veins. His throat works, though around confession or accusation John doesn't know. He pushes it down either way and in the end just feels numb.

"Get some rest, Buck," he says, and leaves to find a drink and Curt; the best ways he knows how to forget.

I guess you also know you're more than a best friend to me, Buck. But I wouldn't ever put that on you. I'd never ask for more than what you've already given me.

It's always been enough.

Buck turns around and beats John to Colonel Harding the next morning. He sits with John the rest of the day and writes ten letters home to John's twenty; not the impersonal, Army bullshit, but real stuff, about the guys they've lost. Neither him nor John knew them all that well, but they were 100th, and that means something. He forces a break between Adams' and Schmalenbach's forts, dragging John to the mess for lunch even though John's so hungover and heartsore he swears he can't eat a thing. Buck loads up two plates regardless and under his careful stare John manages to put away half of his. He doesn't know if Curt talked to Buck or what—if Buck just worked it out by himself. Maybe a little of both. It's not like John swore Curt to secrecy—they'd both been too wasted for that. The bruise on his jaw will blossom tellingly, soon enough. But there's always been parts of himself he feels like he can't let Buck see, and lately the line between them is wearing thin.

Buck's even game enough to let John drag him out drinking, though he nurses the same ginger beer all night. He sits right next to John, Curt on his other side, smelling of aftershave and spearmint gum and with this teasing fucking smile on his lips while the RAF assholes at the other end of the table pretend to know what they're talking about.

"It's not just sports he doesn't follow, huh, Buck?" Curt teases, and it's easy, then, the lot of them loose-limbed and smiling, for John to catch Buck on the chin and give it a squeeze. Buck meets his eyes, his pupils

flat and steady against their backdrop of warm summer blue. John's fingers twitch involuntarily as Buck's gaze drops, for just a moment, to his lips, before he shakes John off and sticks a fresh toothpick between his teeth. Curt's still talking. "I mean, you don't follow anything, do you?"

Buck ducks his head. "I follow you, Curt," he says after a moment, but his eyes find John's again.

Curious, John thinks later, arm slung around Buck's shoulders while they jostle together outside the pub, that Buck didn't bring up Marge. Only thing in the world to turn Gale Cleven's head and John's sure Buck hasn't said her name once since shipping out. Curious, is all he can to say to that, the rest of his head clouded with booze and the feeling of Buck pressed up against him. Down here in the dark, his feet flat—though stumbling—on the cold, cobblestoned earth, John feels further from the war than he's ever been. The only proof it even exists is Buck.

He and Curt stumble back to quarters together, after, Buck trailing behind alone. The weight of Curt is different against John's body, both more and less familiar than Buck all at once. "Guys," he calls, stopping at the door John and Curt have sailed right past. He tugs the toothpick from his mouth and jabs it at them. "Thank God neither of you are navigators."

"C'mon, Buck," Curt slurs. He leans further into John's space and the movement presses his mouth right up against John's collarbone. It's hard to tell in the dark, but John thinks Buck's gaze traces the line of his body from Curt's head, tucked under John's, to where his hand is curled around Curt's hip. "Didn't you say you'd follow me anywhere?"

"I didn't say anywhere." He looks up, right at John, who feels—flayed open. Raw nerve, exposed to the air. Curt starts humming something, tipping sideways, and John has to put his full weight behind him so he won't fall on his ass. Buck makes a move like he's going to step forward and help, but instead just shuffles his foot in the gravel, half-turning his body away. "Don't be stupid," is what he says, quietly, and the way he's looking at John makes it certain the words are just for him. They sound an awful lot like, *don't get caught.*

"When am I ever?" he calls back, and Buck just shakes his head, hand curling into a fist at his side. John turns away from him before the answer damns them both.

I guess you know Curt's more than a friend, too. I don't think either of us meant for it to happen and we both know it's not forever. I mean—what is, in this fucking war? But I don't want you to think—I know I have no right to say this. But I don't want you to think I've moved on.

You'd think it would change things. And maybe it does. Curt doesn't remember the rest of the night after the fight, and John doesn't know how to tell him. Maybe Buck knows that, too, because he doesn't look at Curt any differently. Sits gamely between him and John, still. Sometimes he looks John's way like he wants to say something—but Thorpe Abbotts isn't all that big, and they're rarely alone the way John would like. With Air Exec handed off to Jack he has more time on his hands since before he came over to England, but it's not like either of them are going to start up their 0500 mornings anymore, not with the unpredictable hours of missions and John's easy access to a bar full of booze. It's easier this way, he tells himself, shrugging off the weight of Buck's gaze like it costs him nothing to do so. This way, if anyone asks, from Marge right up to the goddamn MPs, Buck doesn't have to lie.

They fly three more missions. Curt comes back with seventeen-hundred holes in his fort and a grin on his face John kisses off, first chance he has. Two of his crew are wounded but it's a miracle fucking landing, and he does it again in Scotland. John's just glad what Curt told his mom is proving true—it helps, to have friends in high places, even if John's not Air Exec anymore.

The relief in everyone is palpable when they confirm *Wild Cargo*'s safe landing. Buck's shoulders settle where they'd gathered up round his ears, and as John watches he releases the lip he'd been chewing—red raw and puffy, but not deep enough to draw blood. There's a shindig on that night in the mess and John can't have him there looking a wreck. He detours via the kitchens after interrogation, begs a bucket of ice and clean cloth from the staff, and finds Buck in the empty shower block. He's poking at his lip in the mirror, jolting away from the sink when John comes inside.

"You need to keep more than one stick of gum on you," he says, laying the cloth out in a dry sink and tipping half the ice inside. He ties it up, gesturing Buck to come close, who sighs and leans back, legs spread, enough so John can step in-between.

“I swallowed it,” is the quiet reply, muffled by the ice John’s holding to his lip.

“You—what?”

Buck gives him a dirty look. “I swallowed the gum. Flak came real close and we weren’t—I wasn’t expecting it.”

“Oh my God.” John tries to keep his laughter under control, conscious of the way it jolts the ice against Buck’s lip, but he can’t help it. “One Engine Cleven. Defeated by Wrigley’s. I don’t believe it.”

“No Engine Cleven,” Buck corrects, but even with the ice in the way John can see the curve of his smile. “I usually have more on me, but Curt borrowed my last pack.”

“You know you’re not getting that back.”

“I’m aware.” John lifts the ice away to take a look at the damage. It’s still red, now with the cold, and it’s hard to tell but he’s pretty sure the swelling’s gone down. “I can do this myself, you know,” Buck adds quietly, and shifts his hips, close enough John can almost feel the brush of fabric. His breath catches. He hadn’t realised—hadn’t meant to stand so close. They’ve just flown a mission so John is stone cold sober, and doesn’t even have that as an excuse. A lie sits ready on his tongue—“tell me that again after you shit out your gum”—but then he meets Buck’s gaze, cool and clear as the sky they just flew through, and John doesn’t know why he bothers anymore.

Buck knows.

He knows Buck knows.

So, “I want to,” is what he says instead, the most honest thing John thinks he’s ever told Buck. The ice in his hand has started to melt, so he tips it out and replaces it with the rest. “Can I?” he asks, and Buck inclines his head; jutting his lip closer to John, who brushes his thumb over the swell of it as he holds up the ice. Buck doesn’t say anything. His eyes have moved away from John’s but John can still feel them on him, as surely as if Buck had cradled his face in his hands. “You’re coming tonight?”

Buck hmms. “Someone’s gotta keep on eye on you,” he murmurs. “Curt’s a little far away, so I guess I’ll pick up the slack.”

“Buck,” John says. “Gale.”

Buck looks at him.

“It’s not…” He can’t even finish the thought in his head, let alone out loud. Buck reaches up to squeeze John’s wrist.

“It’s okay,” he says. (“It’s alright,” Curt had said.) “You don’t have to explain yourself to me.”

I want to, John thinks, but in the end: Buck’s always been the brave one. John stands in his light long enough, people start to think he’s brave, too.

He steps back, out of Buck’s space, and presses the ice in his hand. “Couple more minutes,” he says. “It’s looking better.”

Buck smiles at him. “Thanks, Bucky. I’ll see you there.”

Later, much later—after the drinking and the singing and the bike race and Curt’s phone call—Buck hands the truth back to him, shaky in uncertain palms. He’s watching the sky over Norwich light up so prettily it’s almost a shame they’re bombs; John watches Buck. There’s a lot of things he could say to Buck’s confession about his father —“then why the hell are you friends with me?”—but he thinks, in this moment, rarer than any he’s shared with Buck, it’s a chance to keep being honest. Whatever that might mean.

“Buck,” he says. “Buck.” Waits for him to look at John. “That’s why you don’t like sports.”

It doesn’t make Buck smile—but then, it’s not the night for it. John knows he’s found another truth, though, turned over the stone it was beneath and let it wriggle into the light. The honesty feels unfamiliar, but so did flying at first. You just have to keep getting back in the pilot’s seat and Lord knows, that’s one thing John’s good at.

The other’s following some guy from Wyoming halfway across the world. “Stone in my shoe,” Buck had called him. Gladly, John thinks.

Any way you’ll have me.

Did I ever tell you Marge wrote me? Way back in basic, you know. She wrote to thank me, for looking after you. I never wrote back, which I guess—said something, in itself. Does she know, you don’t need looking after? Does she know, all those years of training, all you

did was look after me? Sometimes I think she doesn't know you at all. Sometimes I think I don't, either. Sometimes I think you look at me and you're seeing someone else but I'm too afraid to ask, and I don't know if it's because I think you won't answer, or if it's because I think you will. Are you afraid of me, too?

Sometimes, I think… sometimes.

Three weeks after Curt's return from Scotland they're briefed on a mission to Africa. Curt's voice is incredulous as he asks the question they're all thinking, and John can't even bring himself to smile at the major's flat response. It'll be a suicide mission for more than one crew, and John cashes in his prayers upstairs once again: keep them safe, and I'll do anything.

It's maybe the biggest irony of John's life, that it's a boy finally driving him back to church. Mary would get a kick out of that.

He broke it off with Curt after Trondjheim. John's not stupid enough to think there was ever anything permanent between them, but the honesty he'd elicited from Buck meant he couldn't lie to anyone else, anymore. He was so fucking tired of it.

"Can't say I didn't see this coming," Curt had said after a long pull of the whiskey John lifted from the bar. They were out on the wing of his fort again, late night or early morning—John couldn't tell. "Your timing is shit, Major. Didn't I tell you I missed my little spoon?"

"Curt—"

"Save it. I'm fine, really," he'd added, taking one look at whatever was on John's face. Pity, maybe. Guilt, for sure. "Can I ask you somethin'?" John had nodded. "You really think he'll come round?" He handed over the whiskey.

"I don't know. *Really*," when Curt rolled his eyes. "That's the truth. But he knows how I feel and I can't—I can't do this to you, Curt. It's not fair. To you—to any of us."

"I said I was fine, didn't I?" Curt sat down again, dangling his legs over the wing of the plane. "Jesus. This'd be a lot easier if you were harder to fall in love with, John."

The words closed up John's throat in an instant. "You don't love me."

“Just because you’re in denial about your feelings.” He’d held up a hand to stop John from moving closer. “I’m a big boy, I’ll get over it. Think I’d like it if you left me alone now, though.”

John had, and he’d left him the whiskey. Curt was cool bordering on cold with him for three days before something snapped him out of it. Knowing Curt, it was nothing more than simply telling himself to get his goddamn shit together. It didn’t feel like it did before this all started—how could it, now John knew the way it felt to look up at Curt from beneath his lashes, the weight of him heady against his tongue—but they settled back into something familiar. A well-worn groove, dusty with disuse, but John knew they’d find their rhythm yet.

Before Buck could ask about it, John told him, roundabout as it had to be.

“…alright,” Buck had replied, soft and slow, and it didn’t change anything between them, either—but still, John knew he’d done the right thing.

You’re an idiot, Lou wrote him, two days before Regensburg. *I’m proud of you.*

They pile into their forts and wait for the fog to clear. “I’ll see you over there,” John had called to Curt, when he’d peeled off toward *Escape Kit* with the rest of his crew. Curt gave him that same smile, the one John had always answered with a kiss.

“Not if I see you first,” he’d said, with a salute that looked almost genuine.

There was nothing John could say to Buck. They shook hands. John dug out from his pocket a packet of Wrigley’s gum. It creased Buck’s face into the kind of smile John never saw on mission days. “Don’t swallow it,” he’d warned, before tucking the pack in Buck’s jacket.

Buck’s mouth twitched. “Don’t count on it.”

It turns, of course, to hell in the air, like they’d all known it would. John keeps an eye on Curt and Buck when he can, but the shit comes at them faster and faster, and for hours all John knows is the sound of his own heart, beating as loud as the guns.

Buck. Who am I kidding. I’m not sending this fucking letter. You’re

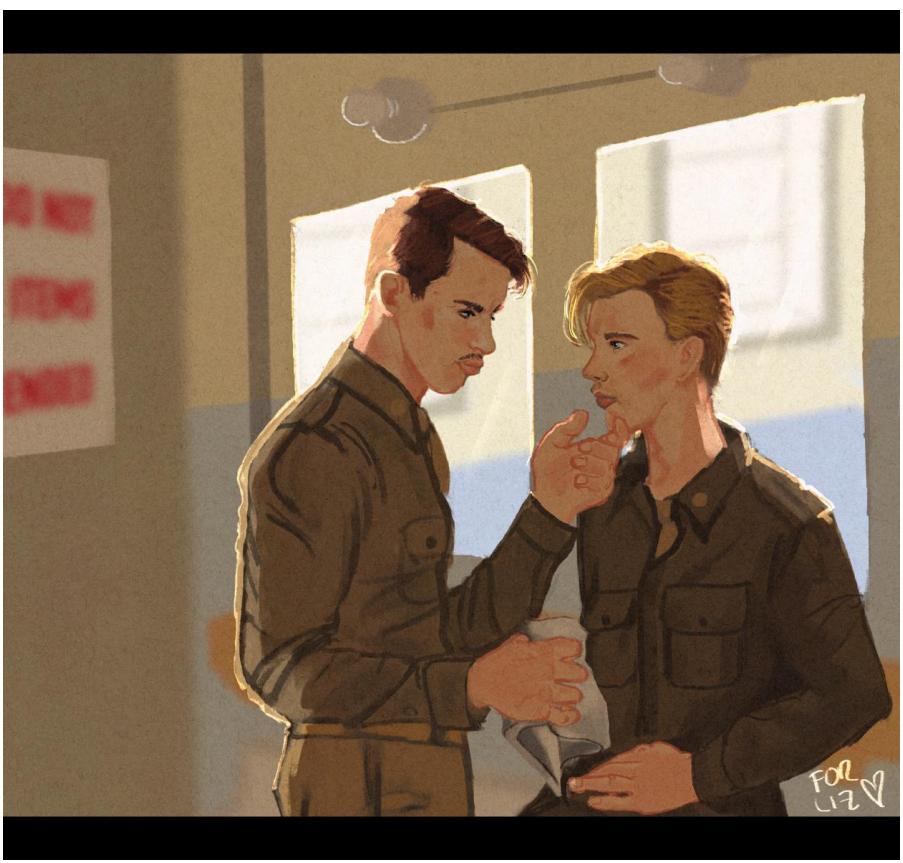
shipping out in a couple days and it would only miss you across the Atlantic. I think I needed to tell you this without telling it to you. I'm flying again tomorrow and I'm scared I might die. There's a pocket inside my sheepskin—I'll put this there. Short of being burned alive in the plane (a strong possibility) it should make it out alright. I've addressed it to 'Gale' so there's no confusion. If I never meet another goddamn Gale in all my life I won't be surprised. If you're reading this I'm dead. Write my family something nice. Tell Curt—

Never mind. I think I'll write him too.

Take care of yourself, Buck.

Win the war for me, okay?

John



art by 6626/ifapromise <3

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Dear Mrs. Biddick,

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dear Mrs. Biddick,

It is with great regret that I write to revise the recent telegram noting your son, 1st Lt. Curtis R. Biddick, O-729787, 418th Bombardment Squadron, 100th Bomb Group, as missing in action. We have since received confirmation that Lt. Biddick was killed in action on August 17, 1943, in Germany.

I had the great privilege of knowing your son personally. Curt was known as a "hard luck" pilot and came through more missions than I can count that lesser men would not have survived. He talked of you and home often, and was particularly saddened he would be missing your 50th birthday, being as we were on that day flying and thus unable to send a telegram. I hope his gift made it to you safely—he spent weeks picking it out.

I have no doubt you wish to know the exact circumstances of your son's passing, but as I am sure you are aware, for bombers lost during a mission this is not always possible. I hope it brings you some measure of peace to know the end would have been quick, and that it happened beside Curt's co-pilot, Richard "Dickie" Snyder. I know Curt spoke of him to you. Whatever happened, know that Curt gave his all—and then he gave his life —in the service of not only his country and his unit but his friends. I can only hope to one day live up to that legacy.

Please do not hesitate to reach out for anything. Curt would have wanted you looked after. I enclose my personal mailing address below.

Sincerely,

Major John C. Egan (Bucky)

100th Bomb Group

8th Air Force

Thorpe Abbotts, England

Chapter End Notes

Curt's remains, along with Dickie's and two other men from his fort, were found and buried by locals in a church cemetery near Pülfringen. They were exhumed and identified by the Graves Registration Service in 1945; only then were all four men revised from Missing to Killed in Action. Details from here.

I had already written this letter when I looked it up; forgive the historical inaccuracy. The GRS did recover and identify remains during the war, often referring to reports from navigators who noted down when and where crews were hit. In this universe, Curt was found not long after Regensburg.

Curt also listed as a next of kin ("name of person who will always know your address") his uncle, Elmer Hughes. (From here.) For the sake of story, I've changed this to his mum.

Edit: Tegan has once again blessed me with her incredible artistic skills <333 please give her art some love on tumblr!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!